

The *Diamond Sūtra*

Now, I am going to talk about a number of highlights from the *Diamond Sūtra* or the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* which is probably the next popular text among the *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses*. *Vajracchedikā* is very much studied and highly venerated in the Mahāyāna world. It has also quite close connection with the Chan and Zen tradition. You may have heard the story of the sixth patriarch Hui-neng who heard someone reciting the *Diamond Sūtra* in the street and as a result of that he decided to go to the monastery to study. According to the legend, he was given the job of pounding rice. After sometime the call for passing over the patriarchal robe came and then there was the ex-change of verses between Shen-xiu and Hui-neng and the later became victorious. Anyway the hearing of the *Vajracchedikā*, the *Diamond Sūtra* found him the path. So this is the text that has enjoyed a great deal of popularity.

The text, if anything, is probably more difficult than the *Heart Sūtra* and more difficult than the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. It is the text, which makes extensive use of paradox. That's why I began the outline of the lecture by referring to the pedagogy of paradox. Pedagogy means teaching method. So the Sūtra teaches by way of paradoxes.

The Pedagogy of Paradox

I want to draw your attention on the section three. In the section three, the Sūtra talks about the real practice of the Mahāyāna. And it says, "the real practice of the Mahāyāna is to liberate all living beings without exception." Whatever living beings they are, the objective of the Mahāyāna is to liberate all of them. The objective of the Bodhisattva is to liberate all living beings without exception. But in reality no living being whatsoever is ever liberated. Now right here, in ordinary term, this is a matter of contradiction, a paradox.

The objective of the Bodhisattva is to liberate all living beings but at the same time he knows that no living being what so ever is ever liberated. Now I am going to leave it like that for a moment. I am not going to explain it. (May be someone among you have guessed the solution to it).

Similarly, with regard to the practices of generosity etc. the Sūtra says, "the Bodhisattva should practice the perfection of generosity etc. without attachment." This is what I was talking about a moment ago. When you practice generosity you practice it without the attachment of the idea of giver, without the attachment of gift, without the attachment of the recipient and without the attachment of the action of giving. And if you practice generosity in this way without attachment then you will acquire limitless merits. So the merit will become immeritable. Because what will occur is that the practice of generosity will become transcendental, will become perfection. The practice of generosity without attachment, in fact, without the notion of the giver, the gift, the recipient and so forth becomes perfection and transcendental.

Again, the Discourse talks about the raft. It talks about the parable of a raft. The Dharma is like a raft that should not be held onto. This same example we also encountered in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, where it talks about the Dharma as a raft. Now the *Diamond Sūtra* goes on to say that there is, in fact, no Dharma; there is no teaching. Why there is no Dharma, why there is no teaching? Because the truth is inexpressible. The truth is beyond words and thought. It is inconceivable. The ultimate truth, the way things really are, is inexpressible. Therefore, there is no Dharma and no teaching. In this same vein, in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna says, "the Buddha never taught any Dharma to anyone anywhere." From the ultimate point of view, as the purpose of the text is to demonstrate the ultimate point of view(*paramārtha satya*), there is no teaching anywhere.

Merit

Another point that the Sūtra makes is regarding the accumulation of merit. It talks about how a Bodhisattva might accumulate merit. This is an interesting quality, an interesting aspect of the text. It introduces the merit that is acquired by listening, by reciting, by memorizing, by passing on this text to other people. It is compared with the merit that one might acquire by making incalculable gifts to incalculable living beings. But that charity is nothing compared to the merit one will gain simply by memorizing, reciting, listening or by transmitting a few lines of this text, the *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*. So here we begin to see something, which is quite common in the Mahāyāna tradition about the notion of sacredness, the merit acquired by remembering, reciting, retaining and transmitting the teachings of the texts. In many places in the *Diamond Sūtra* it is said that the merit acquired by memorizing, reciting and transmitting the Sūtra is far greater than the merit acquired by practicing generosity and other good works. I don't know whether you have this idea in Pāli tradition.

[I am interested to hear about it from one of you who is more conversant than I am in the Pāli tradition. Do you have the same conception? It is kind of exaltation or raising of the importance of the text to a point at which mere memorization and recitation of the text is worth much more merit than ordinary good works such as giving and the like.]

Ārya-pudgalas

Then the text goes on talking about the four *Ārya-pudgalas*. The four holy personalities in the Theravāda tradition are the Sotāpanna and the rest. It says that the Sotāpanna, the stream winner and so forth are only names. These stages are only names; they don't have any real significance. But why don't they have any significance? They don't have any real significance, because there is no ego, there is no conception of 'I'. In so far there is no conception of 'I' how could we have a conception of a stream winner and so forth? How we can have a conception of Ārya Pudgala? And this is in fact has always appeared to me to be something of a contradiction. We are talking about already at the stream entry. One has given up the attachment of self and yet we refer to these persons as Ārya Pudgalas, the holy or noble persons. So here in the text, it says these are only names because in fact at the

point of stream entrance and so forth there is no more ego, there is no attachment to 'I' and 'mine.'

No Going, No Coming and No Staying

Then the text goes on to say how there is no going, no coming and no staying. So again this is from the point of view of the ultimate truth; nothing comes into being, nothing goes out of being and nothing remains or stays. It is an indirect reference again to the three characteristics of conditioned things, that are, origination, duration and destruction; coming into being, remaining in being and lastly going out of being or destruction.

No mind

The text also refers to mind and talks about how there is no mind. There is no past mind, no present mind and no future mind. The whole *Diamond Sūtra* is a string of negation, a string of denial. Just as in the *Heart Sūtra*, it says that in emptiness there is no form, no feeling etc., here in the *Diamond Sūtra* there is no mind – no past mind, no present mind, no future mind. None of these can be grasped. This, of course, reminds us of one of the stories told by the Chan masters. The disciple came to the master and said, 'My mind is distressed, my mind is not at ease. Can master pacify my mind.' And the master said, 'Show me your mind and I'll pacify your mind.' Of course, the disciple was unable to show his mind and he realized that there is no mind to be found, so there is nothing to be pacified. This idea of 'no mind' is something, which is very integral part of the Mahāyāna tradition that the mind also ultimately does not exist. We'll talk about this more when we deal with the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* is well known for the teaching that everything is created by mind. But when we turn and look for the mind itself, we don't find mind. This is also one of the practices that is recommended in the *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses*, that is, to look for one's own mind. So when we look for our own mind, is it round, is it square, is it short, is it long, is it outside, is it inside? Where can we locate our own mind?

Not to Objectify

Then the Sūtra goes on speaking in paradoxical terms about the attainments. You might remember that in the *Heart Sūtra* it is said that there is no attainment; there is no non-attainment. Here in the *Diamond Sūtra*, it is said that the Buddha's attainment of enlightenment is really no attainment, and that's why it is called the attainment of enlightenment. Because there is no attainment it is called attainment of enlightenment. Similarly the accumulation of great merit is really no merit, that's why it is called great merit. Now what does it mean? It is no merit because of the emptiness of the person who accumulates the merit but for the same reason it is great merit because it is not just merit in material sense, it is transcendental merit. So no merit equals great merit. It is not to objectify. The whole message of the text is not to objectify, not to turn things into object. Not turn things into things that you can hold onto.

He Who Sees the Buddha in His Physical Form Does not Really See the Buddha

Then the text goes on to talk about perceiving of the Buddha. This is one of the most famous passages in the whole Sūtra. And again we are taken back to the discussion in the beginning of our course of the equivalence of the Buddha and the Dharma and how really seeing the Buddha implies really seeing the Dharma; 'he who sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha' or 'he who sees the Buddha in his physical form does not really see the Buddha.' And this is said very clearly in the *Diamond Sūtra*. It is said that the Buddha is not to be perceived by means of his thirty-two marks. If you were to perceive the Buddha by means of his thirty-two marks then the Buddha would be indistinguishable from any universal monarch. According to the Buddhist tradition, the universal monarch is believed to possess thirty-two special marks, the same marks that a Buddha possesses. The Buddha cannot be perceived by his thirty-two marks. And it goes on saying that whoever sees the Buddha by his form or sees the Buddha by sound, he is mistaken, his footsteps on the path are perverted and he will never see the Buddha. So again the idea is that perceiving the Buddha by means of his physical form or body is not really perceiving the Buddha. The really perceiving of the Buddha is to perceive the Dharma, the transcendental dimension of the Buddhahood and not to see the Buddha by his physical dimension, by his worldly manifestation. It continues to talk about the Buddha to reinforce the idea of the transcendental nature, the untraceable, unfathomable nature of the Buddha. It says that he/Buddha neither comes nor goes. The Buddha neither comes nor goes, because the Buddha has neither this side nor that side, he is not here nor there. So in that sense, he cannot be pinned down, he cannot be traced in terms of time and space. So the text talks all of these conventional descriptions of the merit of perceiving the Buddha in terms of his transcendental nature and so forth and rejects all those conventional forms that are physically apparent. It also says that the world, the cosmos and so forth are only words and these words are fit for the common people / fit for the man on the street / fit for the ignorant beings not for the enlightened or intelligent truth seekers , because the truth is beyond all words and expression.

Demonstration of the Ultimate Truth

So the final message of the Sūtra is to give up the conventional truth. The message is to abandon all conceptions like those of personality and those of factors and so forth. All conventional truths are invalidated. The only truth is the ultimate truth. And all things are fleeting, all things are like a star in the morning, all things are like a fault of vision. (Here we get a list of similes). The fault of vision happens due to some defect in the vision and one sees hair in the eyes. It is a common example used in the Mahāyāna. Again all things are like a dream. The purpose of the Sūtra is to demonstrate the ultimate truth. To demonstrate the ultimate truth through juxtaposing, through highlighting the opposition between the relative truth and ultimate truth. Liberating all living beings is the object of the Bodhisattva, but the real Bodhisattva knows no living beings ever liberated and why is that? Because no living being really exists. The ultimate truth is that there is no really existing living being. So there is no 'I' and no 'mine.' Similarly great merit is no merit, because

ultimately the only merit that is taken into account is the realization of emptiness, the non-existence of the 'I' and the object and so on. So from the point of view of the ultimate truth all of these conventional usages, the acquisition of merit, the Bodhisattva's vow to liberate all living beings are non-existence; all of these are empty.

The Conventional Truth and Ultimate Truth Go Together

I need to make the particular point that the conventional truth and the ultimate truth don't contradict each other. They don't contradict each other, because they, so to speak, have different purposes. They operate at different level. They reflect different point of view. Nāgārjuna says, "Without relying on the conventional truth, the ultimate truth is not taught. Without arriving at the ultimate truth, liberation is not gained." So we rely upon the conventional truth to teach the ultimate truth. We encourage people to realize the ultimate truth so that they may gain liberation. So the conventional truth and ultimate truth go together. These two truths are just stages, levels of perception. So the transition from the conventional truth to ultimate truth is a transition in our way of perceiving things. In another place Nāgārjuna says that if you take the world as cause and condition / as dependent then you experience *saṃsāra*. If you take reality, you take what is given as real, conditioned and dependent then it is *saṃsāra*. If you take it as not conditioned, and not dependent then it is *nirvāṇa*. So it depends upon how we perceive the world, how we take the world. We take the world in one way then it is bondage, it is suffering, it is *saṃsāra*. You take the world another way, it leads to *nirvāṇa*, and it's freedom. So this transition from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa* is a subjective transition, something that takes place within the perceiving subject, within each and everyone of us depending how we view reality. It is not a typical movement. It is not a material change. It is not a change of address. It is not moving from one land to another, from one world to another. It is the change that takes place within our mind, having to do with the way in which we perceive reality. So the acquisition, the attainment, the gain of *nirvāṇa* is the mental acquisition, the mental achievement, something that happens subjectively, within our own mind. That is why the Buddha also could not say whether the world has a beginning or not, whether the world has limit or not. The beginning and the ending of the world depend on the subject. They don't depend upon anything external. They don't depend upon objective independent reality. They are mind dependent. Whether the world exists or not depends upon our perception. So this is the point that the *Prajñāpāramitā* Literature attempts to make through the negation of all conventional forms with which we are familiar.

What it is doing is to teach us to be detached from the raft. The purpose of doing this is so that we do not remain attached even to the Dharma. In the parable of the raft the Buddha said, "one should give up the Dharma, let alone non-Dharma." So at first people are taught to give up unwholesome attitudes, to give up evil inclinations and later on when they are well established on the path, **when they understand wholesome action, at that point, they need to be taught not to hold on to the wholesome action, to be able to relinquish them, to be able to give them up, so that they can attain freedom.** So we have progressive movement here from ignorance, bondage to virtue, to a happier condition. But eventually if we want to attain

freedom, if we want to attain enlightenment then we have to go beyond this virtue, the fortunate rebirth, good condition and so on. This is the difference between the two goals that Buddhism teaches. Buddhism offers a provisional goal and a final goal. The provisional goal is, of course, *abhyudaya*, that is heaven, fortunate rebirth, good circumstances and the final goal, *niḥśreyasa*, that is liberation and unbinding freedom. And all the Dharmas that we practice, all the virtues we might practice will only lead us to happiness and prosperity. If we want to gain ultimate enlightenment and freedom we have to relinquish our conception of 'I' and 'mine.' We have to relinquish our attachment to practice and person. We have to relinquish our attachment to dualistic conception of existence and non-existence, permanence and impermanence, self and not-self, happiness and suffering, one and many and so forth. We have to relinquish all these dualistic conceptions so that we can attain enlightenment without any residue / without any left over. We have to give up any shadow of conception or negation of conception, or object or negation of object and the like. We have to achieve complete openness without any mental support, without any objective support, without relying on any form, any sound or any mental object. Liberation is when the mind is unbound, when the mind is freed from relying on any objective support so that the liberation we attain is truly the supreme and beyond all limitation, beyond all condition. So this is the message of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sūtras*. It opens up a wide panorama, a wide stage, and a great theater in which it is possible to attain Buddhahood. It dissolves the limitation that keep us in the prison of *saṃsāra* and it allows us to develop that kind of enlightened mind which is similar to the enlightened mind of the Buddha.

The Perfection of Wisdom is not for Those Who Haven't Begun to Tread the Path

There will be considerable degree of discussion about this in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (楞伽經) and other discourse when we look at the whole process of how to turn bondage and suffering and the experience of the ordinary living beings into the experience of an enlightened one. This we will see first in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and then followed by the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra schools of the Mahāyāna. For the time being, the *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* has achieved its objective. Its objective is to sweep away all these pre-conceptions, to sweep away all those "truths" with small 't' that we have been used to relying upon as practitioner.

Perfection of Wisdom Discourses is not for non-practitioner. *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* is not for non-Buddhist. The *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* is not for those who haven't begun to tread the path. *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* is for those who are treading the path, who understand virtue, who understands wholesome action, who understands karma, who understands rebirth and who understands desirability of achieving a higher and a pure state of being. *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses* is for those people. It is meant to open them up, to make them ready to become Buddhas. To make them ready to abandon all conceptions, to make them ready to give up the raft when they have crossed the river. That is all about the *Perfection of Wisdom Discourses*.